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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTHES

By SYLVIA H. BLISS

"The Horse I ride has his own whole fell: strip him of the girths and flaps and extraneous tags I have fastened round him, and the noble creature is his own sempster and weaver and spinner; nay his own bootmaker, jeweler, and man-milliner; he bounds free through the valleys, with a perennial rainproof court-suit on his body; . . . nay, the graces also have been considered, and frills and fringes, with gay variety of color, are not wanting. While I—good Heaven—have thatched myself over with the dead fleeces of sheep, the bark of vegetables, the entrails of worms, the hides of oxen or seals, the felt of furred beasts, and walk abroad a moving Ragscreen, overheaped with shreds and tatters raked from the Charnel-house of Nature, where they would have rotted, to rot on me more slowly."—*Sartor Resartus*, THOMAS CARLYLE.

Because of our confirmed habit of apparel the question, Why did we wear clothes? is seldom raised. Obviously as individuals, living in the twentieth century, we clothe ourselves because it is the custom; and further, to conserve the heat of the body and to satisfy the claims of modesty. Adding to these reasons the large share played by personal vanity the matter appears to have been settled out of court, leaving no cause for further prosecution of the case. But if we slip the noose of our habitual attitude toward the human race, regarding ourselves simply as members of the zoological genus *Homo* and related by ties of blood to all other living creatures, this unique and distinguishing habit of dress seems to require further consideration. Why does man thus add to nature?

Custom, the mightiest force operative to-day in the matter of dress, is invalid as a reason for the inauguration of clothing, custom being but the repetition of acts and observances already introduced. In view of the probable fact that the primordial home of man was in tropical or sub-tropical regions, and in the light of what we shall presently find to be the character of rudimentary clothing, the protection of the

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NOTE.—In addition to the authorities named in the text the writer is indebted to the following works: "The History of Mankind," Ratzel; "The Races of Men," J. Deniker; "Woman's Share in Primitive Culture," O. T. Mason; "Cyclopædia of Costume," Planche; various articles in cyclopædias and magazines; and to Robert H. Lowie, Associate Curator of the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

body from cold can hardly have served as the primary motive. Even in a climate so harsh and changeable as that of South Australia where there is apparent need of protection the natives are totally naked or wearing only a body ring. Coming to the consideration of modesty as a reason for clothing we find ourselves upon no firmer ground. The manifestations of modesty or of shame at the violation of "physical self-respect" are by no means confined to one portion of the body. In different nations the head, face, breast, foot, knee, or finger tips must be covered in deference to decency, while among peoples accustomed to tattoo or paint the body it is considered immodest to appear without these decorations, to a Carib woman the omission of paint being a more serious offence than the failure to don her girdle. On the other hand it is related of an aboriginal girl in the valley of the Orinoco, that having put on a gown to please a European visitor, she was much abashed when a member of her tribe appeared, and hastily threw off the garment. Shame would thus appear to result from violation of custom and close study of the facts has led several writers, notably Westernmark in "The History of Human Marriage," to the conclusion that ideas of modesty are purely relative and that shame is not the cause but the result of clothing.

That the initial impulse to dress came from the desire to render the body more attractive is a conclusion receiving support from the science of ethnography which has established the fact that in the evolution of clothing ornament preceded dress. One authority states that "the first and most primitive mode of personal adornment is certainly that in which the body itself is adorned without the putting on of any extraneous objects whatever." And of these adornments it is conceded that the daubing of the body with coloring matter obtained from colored earths and the juice of certain plants is the most primitive. Nearly all peoples who go naked thus adorn themselves. Of the Australians, for example, it is said, "Even the poorest and most wretched do not forget to paint their bodies," and the Fuegians daub faces, hair, and occasionally the entire body with pigments, red, yellow, white or black.

It has been asserted that the scars and blood stains displayed by the returned warrior, serving as a mark of distinction and honor and further as a sex lure, constituted the first decoration, giving rise at length to painting and tattooing. In regard to the latter practice this theory finds support in the custom of the Papuans of New Guinea with whom tattooing

upon a man signifies that he has killed some one. From accidental to deliberate scarring of the body is but a short step.

The habit of ornamentation, if it may be thus designated, grew apace. Tattooing in all its varied forms, mutilation and deforming of the body, breaking and filing of teeth, objects inserted in the ears, nose and lips, elaborate arrangements of hair with ornaments attached, and at length strips of hide and sinew of animals and herbaceous twigs were fastened around parts of the body where there was a depressed surface, above a bony projection or a muscular protuberance—the neck, the waist, the wrists and ankles, “as is still seen among the Fuegians, Melanesians, Bushmen and Australians.” Here we have the prototype of the girdle, collar, necklace, belt and bracelet. To these were attached secondary ornaments, shells, seeds, bones, feathers, fur and flowers, and finally a beast’s skin to form a mantle hung from the neck and to the girdle were fastened leafy branches, pieces of bark, tiny aprons of human or animal hair, and coverings of feathers and grass, the rude beginnings of the skirt. A somewhat crucial matter and one begetting controversy is that of the origin of the fig leaf, loin cloth or apron. In the book of Genesis is probably the oldest attempt to account for clothing and there it is attributed to the sense of shame. “And the eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.” Carlyle, with later knowledge and insight wrote: “Shame—as yet a stranger to the Anthropophagous bosom, arose there mysteriously under clothes;” and his conclusion is quite in line with the modern conviction that clothing gave birth to modesty. Several authors and especially Westermarck contend that the various coverings above enumerated are not for the purpose of concealment but to make prominent and draw attention to the parts of the body thus hidden, this being one of the most powerful means of sexual selection.

Some investigators find in the jealousy of husbands a reason for the origin of clothing while Havelock Ellis, in “The Evolution of Modesty,” contends that it was the man who first covered portions of the body and this not from motives of modesty but for protection, his organism being the more sensitive and his activities of wider range. In view of the fact that loss of the tail and assumption of the upright position left the body peculiarly vulnerable this theory has much to commend it. A further view relating more especially to decoration, is championed by J. G. Frazer, in “The Golden Bough,” and by Ernest Crawley in “The Mystic Rose,” and

is to the effect that mutilation and ornament exert a magical influence over the various organs of sense and serve to guard and insulate dangerous bodily functions, being practically a "permanent amulet or charm." Others have called attention to the superstitious factor in clothing, which attributes to small objects and trophies a beneficial influence, "tending to produce in the wearer the attributes of the object or of the whole of which the object was a part."

Discriminating and applicable though these theories may be it is obvious that no one of them adequately accounts for the fact of clothing nor sufficiently explains its complexity and variety. It may be, as one writer suggests, that the ancient Britons painted the body with earthy pigments to check the cooling effect of free evaporation from the skin; that the Andaman Islanders plaster themselves thickly with mud in order to resist the attacks of insects; the skin mantle of the Fuegian, shifted to meet the varying winds, and the elaborately fitted fur garments of the Eskimo, are obviously worn in deference to rigorous climate; the gourd or sling of certain South American tribes probably serves as a protection from injury, and the exceedingly small pearl-decorated apron of the Kafir belle is doubtless worn as a means of attraction; vanity, aesthetic feeling, the desire for distinction and the motive of comfort play their part. But as the primitive clothing impulse manifests itself in such varied forms we are justified in retreating beyond these partial hypotheses to one more profound and fundamental which underlies and includes them all.

Too great stress must not be laid on the factor of use, on an assumed end determining the particular form taken by the primitive impulse to decorate or clothe the body. The doctrine of use as a factor in evolution finds less favor than formerly. In the language of Professor William Patten of Dartmouth College, "The use made of an organ can not be the cause of its origin, for the organ must be present in the first place, in some form or other, before any use can be made of it:" and while to-day we find man by reason of his acquired equipment of reason and foresight working toward definitely conceived ends, it is hardly reasonable to attribute to the primitive creature at the outset of the human career clearly defined motives which determined his acts. As has been pointed out by the naturalists Geddes and Thompson, human nature can not be rightly understood apart from the biological approach, and even in a matter apparently so far removed from the natural as that of clothing there will be found many analogies to

zoölogical and biological facts. Primitive psychological attitudes arise from what has been termed physiological thought and the instinctive inner urge prompting the acts of primitive man may be not inaptly compared to those special internal conditions which biologists recognize as determining local growths, organs and structure, lower down in the scale of life.

In order adequately to frame a philosophy of clothes it is necessary to view as clearly as possible man's place in nature. Though there are now on earth only isolated examples of hairy men it is probable that the primitive human being and certainly his precursor were covered with hair. We may or may not accept the Darwinian conclusion that the loss of our coat of hair was due to aesthetic reasons, "the members of one sex having chosen as mates those of the other who were least hairy," but the fact remains that man, as Carlyle said, is by nature a naked animal. Moreover he is, broadly speaking, the only naked animal. In the world of living things are displayed fur, feathers, thickened and colored hide, scales, various armors, and integuments, for the tree bark and for all plant forms fitness and beauty of investiture. Man alone is left with an incomplete exterior. His position in nature is anomalous. All other creatures are finished and complete, clothed and with instinct sufficient to form themselves an abode which remains unaltered with the passing of the ages. Man alone must supplement nature. He has progressed by reason of his incompleteness and to what extent his initial advance was due to the lack of a satisfactory and fitting exterior is matter for conjecture. The gods left man naked in order that he might clothe himself: unfinished that he might indefinitely continue the process of development.

Underlying all the various motives which apparently lead man to paint, tattoo, decorate and protect the body is the fundamental feeling of incompleteness, of dissatisfaction with self as it is, and clothing in its origin and subsequent development is the result of his attempt to remedy the deficiency, to replace what he has lost. The covering and ornament which human beings supply for the body stand in lieu of fur, feathers, and all the varied exteriors found in lower nature and further, serve like ends of protection and adornment. The fact of the reputed complete nakedness of certain peoples does not militate against this theory of the primary reason for clothing. While individuals may be entirely nude it is said that in no tribe do all the members remain constantly as nature left them. Study of "our contemporary ancestors" discloses, it is probable, most of the forms of adornment and body cover-

ing used by prehistoric man—complicated in many instances by contact of the savages with civilized races—and as might be expected there are peoples in whom the clothing impulse has not developed, or but feebly, going no farther than paint, the mutilation of some organ or the wearing of a necklace or belt.

Carlyle found the first spiritual want of a barbarous man to be decoration and while it is difficult to connect with any form of spirituality the all but incredible mutilations practiced by certain tribes, if we interpret spiritual want in terms of dissatisfaction with self we may indeed find in these primitive attempts to alter the body the germs of that discontent that is termed divine. The Bongo woman encouraging an exuberant growth of proud flesh to form embossed ridges on her arm, the Botocudos of Brazil with large flat discs of wood worn in slits cut in the ears and under lip, the Papuans and Australians perforating the nasal septum to hold a bone or stick, the Masai of East Africa with ear lobe enlarged to many times its natural size by a stretching stone, Chinese with compressed feet, Indians with flattened skull, are all impelled by motives deeper than those commonly imputed. Though the custom of deforming the body has all but died out in civilized races, clothing has until very recently strangely and often grotesquely disguised the natural form. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it is said there was hardly a part of men's bodies that was not made to look deformed by their clothing.

Man's place in nature must be still further defined if we are to appreciate to the full the significance of clothing. Humanity appears to be a continuation of the main stem of life of which all lower forms are the branches. They diverged from the central stem, advanced a pace and became what Nietzsche would term the goals of nature, plant, insect, animal and bird,—man, according to the German philosopher's thought, being not a goal but a bridge. The life which was to become human continued to advance though divested of many possibilities. It is not necessary to accept all the implications of Bergson's philosophy in order to make use of his pregnant idea that life, evolving in the direction of man has abandoned many things by the way. Tendencies which were incompatible with the main trend of life were dropped and set up a subordinate line of development. Applying this conception to the matter in hand we may say that man has left far behind the possibility of a furred or feathered exterior, of blossoms, thorns, horns, tails, and countless other structures and appendages displayed by lower forms of life, plant and animal. It may be said

further—and here is the crucial point in our philosophy of clothes—that these structures, appendages and ornaments which are characteristic of life other than human, survive in man as subconscious dispositions which at various times in the world's history, some in one race and some in another, are embodied in his dress. Actual physical survivals of lower forms of life appear during the development of the human fetus. Certain of these disappear, others are modified to form working parts of the organism, while occasionally one persists as an atrophied structure in the fully developed human being. In the light of these facts we are warranted in assuming the presence of corresponding mental survivals.

The variety and vagary of garb are thus not due to mere whim and vagary of the human mind. Man is the epitome of all tendencies and the reason for the complexity of his clothing impulse may be found in the complexity of his mental inheritance which includes all that he has lost physically on the way to man. There is scarcely a covering in nature that has not been utilized or imitated in human apparel; there can hardly be found a protuberance or appendage that may not have served as the prototype for some form of human mutilation or adornment. Fur serves both savage and civilized man. Certain tribes of the Amazon basin fix a covering of feathers on their bodies, daubed with a sticky substance; other tribes insert feathers in perforations in the cheek or nasal septum, while feathers as adornment, especially of the head are found the world over and not least in modern civilized nations. There are striking simulations of horns, notably the head-dress of some African tribes, and in England what has been called "the preposterous horned head-dress" of the reign of Henry V. The student of costume will come upon many an arresting likeness of coronet, cockade, neck ruff, stock, and frill, plume, sash, and train, to natural organic characteristics of other creatures and it is interesting to note in passing that a caricature of the date of 1786, entitled "Modern Elegance," shows two women wearing the Bouffon, an exaggerated neckerchief of cambric, and above them the figure of a Pouter pigeon with characteristically inflated oesophagus.

Perhaps the most striking example of physiological habit surviving in man as a mental tendency is that of the tail. This appendage has been so often simulated that it has given rise to the fable of men with tails and even our modern sash and train may, without stretch of the imagination, be referred to a like lowly origin. The student of savage costume comes again and again upon instances of this addition to man's



natural equipment and while the claim may be made that this widespread habit is due to imitation of animals it may with greater reasonableness be attributed to the subconscious reminiscence of an actual tail. This view is strengthened by the fact that the tail-like ornament is often worn on the front of the body and quite naturally the conclusion is reached that the various forms of the fig leaf, apron and clout may be included in the same category. The tail being one of the most recent of our losses, physical vestiges of this appendage occasionally, it is said, persisting in man, the impulse to thus supplement the body is strong. Deeper than the ends which they serve is the reason for all forms of apparel.

This conclusion is applicable also when we come to consider the relation of clothing to the fact of sex. The doctrine of sexual selection—the development of beauty of coloring, ornament and the like through their influence in courtship and consequent increase through inheritance, has been subjected to much criticism since its promulgation by Darwin, but whatever theory finally prevails the fact remains that the attainment of sexual maturity and the arrival of the period of reproduction,—seasons which in all life but human are practically coincident,—are marked by all the beauty, elaboration, fragrance and exuberance of which the organism is capable. Secondary sexual characters such as manes, beards, crests, tusks and antlers, combs, wattles and top-knots, are acquired with the approach of sexual maturity and frequently are retained in their full glory only during the reproductive period. Of the deer it is said that the production of antlers is intimately connected with the generative function and in many birds there are developments peculiar to the breeding season, such as the great throat pouch of the male bustard and the egret's tuft of long and delicate feathers. The scent glands of many creatures are more active at this season, the beauty and fragrance of the flower—the flower itself—are signs of reproductive power, and the entire imago state of many insects,—that brief period of beauty that of all their life cycle is the only one known to most of us,—exists solely for the purpose of mating and depositing of eggs, the insects taking no food, the mouth parts of certain species being completely atrophied. With this heritage of tendencies it is but natural that man, the epitome of all lower life, should display a like close connection between the development of the sex function and exquisite attire and with his greatly lengthened period of courtship enormously increase the beauty and magnificence of his costume. Here again we are but carrying out laws which

in nature are organic. Antedating and underlying the conscious motive of sex-appeal is the instinctive impulse to beautify and adorn the body.

That it is the female who now, among human beings, is distinguished by beauty and magnificence of apparel is a fact which controverts biological precedent, for in other forms of life where the sexes differ the excess of display is generally with the male. This condition appears to have obtained also in clothing up to recent times and gradually gave way to our present "dead level of negative commonplace and drab, grave-like nonentity" for the reason that man, as clothing more and more covered the body, found the accumulation of drapery a hindrance to his strenuous activities. With the Romans two costumes were adopted, one for labor and one for ceremonial occasions and finally the utilitarian style dominated men's attire, the decorative function being represented by women's dress. It is probable that the modern male mind is influenced likewise by the motive which led Montaigne to discard the polychrome clothing of his age. He declared that he would not be bothered about deciding the color of his garments and so wore only black and white. In numberless ways has the primitive clothing impulse been modified to meet the contingencies of civilization.

It is easy to attribute change of fashion to mere caprice or to mercenary contrivance on the part of dressmaker and milliner. Easy and natural also to decry as vain or dandified the individual whose efforts are concentrated on exquisite dress. This is but a superficial view of the matter. In all his efforts of this character man is guided not only by the impulse to rehabilitate himself with all that he has lost on the way to the human level but to attain as well the absolute freedom, comfort, suitability and beauty of attire displayed elsewhere in nature. Dominated by this unconscious ideal he is dissatisfied with all ill-fitting, unsuitable, unlovely garments and age after age strives for the perfect human costume, one which for man shall be as fitting, natural and characteristic as the exterior of fur and feathers for animal and bird. But he rarely more than approximates this condition. Confronted with the difficulty of making his garb conform and give expression to an ever growing spirit he follows a flying goal. Setting aside the servile imitation which is the motive moving multitudes in their choice of garments we find beneath every important change of style a change of mental outlook. Our oft-derided fashion makers may be more closely in touch with

the spirit of the age than we dream, registering in their creations profound movements of the human soul.

The fact is significant that, generally speaking, in the East costume has undergone relatively little change as compared to the West with its mingling of peoples and where civilization is complex and unstable. The most rapid alterations of style attend on swift changes of ideas, ideals and conditions. In France where civilization has attained a very high point dress reaches its finest, most exquisite development. Countries isolated and homogeneous long preserve the distinguishing national costume while with the breaking down of individuality by mingling with other races the dress becomes heterogeneous and complex as at the fall of the Roman Empire and in the Japan of to-day.

In consequence of the instinctive desire for absolute fitness of apparel we find human beings inventing distinctive costume for every condition and occasion,—youth, age, rank, occupation, war, worship, the funeral and the dance. This custom has its beginning among peoples low in the scale of civilization, as the Fuegians, who use upon the body four colors of paint—red and yellow in token of friendliness, white as war-paint and black as a symbol of grief, and their neighbors the Patagonians who on the eve of the wedding night cover the body with white paint.

With the development of individuality there is corresponding development of variety in style in order to provide for each person a distinctive costume, but the human soul, too great and complex for its vestments, must go farther. Ordinary occasions do not provide scope for all its tendencies. Other selves within us must have their setting. In the pageant past times and personalities are rehabilitated and in the masquerade various conditions and occupations from which we are debarred actual participation, are for the moment, through the medium of clothes, made our own. In the masque also we may clothe our fantasies, moods and aspirations, the angel, devil, butterfly and flower within us each having its brief hour.

The era of distinctive national costume is passing. We are emerging from the dominance of blind impulse and entering upon the stage of preparation for a distinctly human garb. There are occasional efforts to break away from our modern complexity and elaboration and return to the noble simplicity of Greek attire,—the one perfect costume, as it has been called. But no one is able to forecast the future. The ultimate costume is as little predicable as the ultimate man.